

1765

HINDSIGHT

Agreeing to Disagree

By Jody Morgan

Reading through 300 years of town meeting records, one gets the sense that Duxbury voters have seldom settled a major issue without sending it to a study committee. Votes taken at one meeting are reconsidered at the next. The proponents of the shore road we call Washington Street had to take the town to court to get their project approved, and then they had to haggle with their fellow citizens for three more years to convince them to complete the thoroughfare with a bridge across the Bluefish River.

Endless debates concerning the opening and closing of gates blocking cart tracks across pasture land, the marking and remarking of boundaries, the advantages and disadvantages of setting cattle free to graze in the woods, and other similar matters of strictly local interest suggest that Duxbury residents were too caught up in the struggles of everyday living to care much about what was happening in other places. But the meeting notes of October 21 and 23, 1765, generate a totally different impression.

The Stamp Act, passed by a voice vote in the House of Lords March 8, 1765, was due to take effect Nov. 1. Thenceforth, in order to be legal, every document issued in the colonies, from a birth certificate to a diploma, from a bill of lading to a mortgage, would require a stamp indicating that payment of the appropriate tax had been rendered. Every printed page would need a stamp: every newspaper, pamphlet, almanac and book. Indeed, every business transaction would be taxed. The British

government thought it was time the colonies paid for the cost of the French and Indian War and the cost of British troops remaining in America. As you probably recall, the colonists thought otherwise.

A congress of representatives from nine colonies was meeting during October in New York. On the 25th of that month, the Massachusetts House would pass a set of resolutions of its own. On the 21st of October, Duxbury Town Meeting voted not to accept the provisions of the Stamp Act. On

this act should take place in this Province in the present distressed condition, we should be involved in inevitable ruin. We do now therefore enjoin and instruct you that you neither directly nor indirectly be aiding, favoring, countenancing, assisting or any other ways instrumental in promoting the said Act in execution, but that you oppose the same with all the eloquence and address you are master of

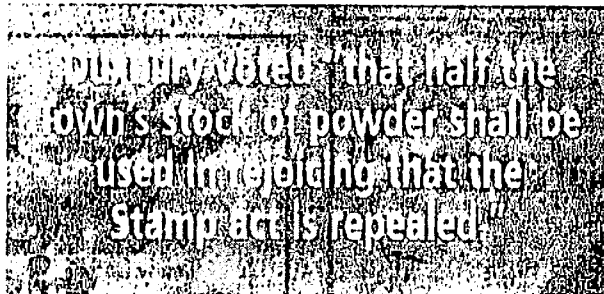
Major Briggs Alden, the elected representative of Duxbury, was an imposing

Duxbury citizens intended to show support for the actions of the pillaging patriots or simply deny responsibility for the damages done by them is difficult to decipher. However, Duxbury's own determination to defy the Stamp Act is evident.

When the Stamp Act was repealed Feb. 22, 1766, the British government was left with a bill of 630 pounds for the printing of the never-to-be-used stamps. By the time the tax was to go into effect, even the greediest loyalists in every colony had been convinced that the position of stamp tax collector was untenable.

Word of the repeal reached Boston long before the official document arrived in mid-May. On March 31, 1766, Duxbury voted "that half the Town's stock of powder shall be used in rejoicing that the Stamp act is repealed." Accordingly, a procession of townspeople paraded through Duxbury to Captain's Hill with effigies of the former British prime ministers responsible for the ill-conceived legislation. Six carriage guns fired the salute. The effigies of Lords Bute and Grenville were hung from the gallows and then burned.

Clearly, Duxbury Town Meeting has been capable of making swift decisions on issues demanding immediate response. For more ordinary concerns, long-term debate allowing every aspect of a project to be examined seems to remain the order of business. By agreeing to perpetuate disagreement until an issue either ceases to be of interest or has been discussed from every imaginable point of view, Duxbury residents honor the example of the founding freeholders.



the 23rd, the instructions to their representative to the General Court were read into the meeting notes. The chosen committee, made up of Capt. Wait Wadsworth, Capt. John Wadsworth, Ebenezer Bartlett, Isaac Partridge and Ezra Alden, took only two days to compose the statement, which the voters approved immediately:

We esteem the said Stamp act to be unconstitutional and subversive of the rights and privileges of his Majesty's American Subjects, contrary not only to the Royal Charter granted to our ancestors, and to the Magna Charter, the Great Charter of British liberty, but likewise to the grand prerogative of human Nature, and to that liberty wherewith Our Blessed Lord hath made us free: We likewise think that if

gentleman. He utilized his impressive 220-pound frame to advantage when arguing a point with "all the eloquence" for which he was noted. He was, according to Justin Winsor's "History of Duxbury," a close friend of Thomas Hutchinson, whose Boston home had been destroyed by a mob in August because he had accepted the crown's right to impose the kind of "internal taxation" embodied by the Stamp Act.

Despite Alden's friendship with one of the principal victims, the town further instructed their representative, "We likewise enjoin it upon you to oppose in the strongest manner any motion or motions that may be made in the General Assembly, to make a relation or compensation for the riotous proceedings at Boston." Whether